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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 49

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A Note on the
Teaching of 'English Language
and Literature',
with some Suggestions

By

R. B. McKerrow, Litt.D.

Formerly Lecturer in English Literature and Bibliography at King's College
(University of London)

June, 1921

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NOTE

The Publications Sub-Committee of the English Association, without accepting responsibility for the views set forth in this Pamphlet, have issued it as a contribution of value to the discussion of the teaching of English.

A NOTE ON THE TEACHING OF 'ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE', WITH SOME SUGGESTIONS

AMONG the minor results of the Great War has been a revival in the interest taken by educationalists and by the general public in the historical study of English Literature and of the English Language. This interest, which seems to be in the main—though by no means entirely—due to the desire to obviate the 'waste of time' on 'unpractical' subjects such as Greek and Latin, and to substitute something of more living interest, has shown itself in a number of articles, discussions and conferences on the matter, most of which have no doubt in their way been of value, but which seem seldom to have touched upon what after all is the real essence of the question, namely, the value of 'English' as an educational subject. By this value I mean the extent to which the mind of a student who has been through a course in English will, apart from the examination-facts (names, dates, &c.) which he has learnt, have been refined and made more responsive to the appreciation of beauty, strengthened to reason more justly, and broadened to appreciate a wider range of ideas. To what extent will the study of English increase the student's own enjoyment of life and make him a better citizen of the world? For, after all, this is surely the main purpose of education.

We must remember that, whether we like it or not, English will in the future have to take the place of classics in the education of the great majority. Few students will have the time to make an adequate study of both subjects, and it is hard to deny that if the choice must be made between them, English is—provided that one important condition be fulfilled—the more suitable for an Englishman of to-day. That condition is that the English course shall be as good an instrument of general training as the classical course was. Now the classical course at its best afforded a very fine all-round education, not only in literary appreciation and technique, but also in clearness of thought and in reasoned exposition, in the understanding of a most interesting and important period of the world's history, in art,

and in philosophy. (If the English course is to replace the classics it must afford a training as wide, as deep, and as stimulating in every respect as the classical course at its best. Indeed, in some ways it must be an improvement upon that, for the classical education no longer meets the needs of to-day.)

But does it afford such a training? I venture to say that at present it does not.

It is, I think, by no means an unusual feeling among at any rate the younger section of those who are engaged in the teaching of English subjects that all is not well with the study. It does not seem as a rule to attract the best students, and in the general opinion does not rank with most of the other divisions of the curriculum. Indeed, in some quarters it seems to be looked on almost as a sham kind of learning, an amateurish sort of business altogether, for the teaching of which real scholarship is of less importance than a good presence and fluent diction. And yet considering what the subject is: that it deals, or should deal, with the very flower of our national life, taking account of almost all the best work of the best minds of the modern world; one might naturally suppose that hardly any other subject could surpass it in interest and real importance.

Again, some teachers do not feel that the results of the English course are satisfactory. The students, even granting that they are not the best, do not seem to have benefited from the time which they have spent over the study as they should have done. Their knowledge is often scrappy, they seem unable to envisage their subject from any point of view but that of the text-books in which they have studied it; they show little or no power of independent judgement, and they are often singularly blind and, indeed, indifferent to the merits of whatever does not happen to have fallen within the scope of their particular studies. With some of them, indeed, the course of literature seems to do little else but develop a power of fluent and uncritical laudation, with the help of innumerable clichés, of the particular objects of their teacher's admiration.

Lastly, some of the teachers, though perhaps only a few, are not entirely satisfied with themselves and their own grasp of their subject. Some of them feel that they have not the general knowledge of the language and literature which they ought to have, and are obliged to have recourse to specializing in some particular small sub-section or period, and frankly confessing that they are not much interested in the rest. They do the best they can, often complaining of the inadequacy of the methods by which they themselves were taught, but most of them continue to follow these very methods in their own teaching.

Now the view that I venture to put forward is that the usual teaching of English, both language and literature, is on an altogether wrong basis. (That it is treated far too much as a mere instruction in unco-ordinated facts, an affair of memory rather than of reason, that little or no attempt is made to plan out for students such a course as can be adequately dealt with within the time allotted to it, and that the educative value of the subject is merely assumed without any attempt to justify the assumption. Lastly, and most important of all, no consideration is usually given to the question of whether a student is to continue his work after the particular course is completed or whether that is to be the end of it, a question which makes an enormous difference in the way in which the course should be planned, and, indeed, in the best method of approaching the subject as a whole.) It is my belief that in the study of English we have a medium of the very greatest potential value for both mental and aesthetic training provided that it is properly handled, fully able to take the place of classics on the aesthetic side and having the additional advantage that, covering as it does more than a thousand years of differing conditions, it may be made a far more powerful instrument for stimulating the imagination and producing that form of mental suppleness which can adapt itself to unfamiliar conditions, than could possibly be afforded by any but the widest study of Greek and Latin. It is, or should be, an interesting subject on account of the familiarity of its elementary stages, while it is attractive to many by reason of its apparent 'practical' value. Lastly, there is no subject which can so easily be followed up by the student in after-life, provided only that the elements have been properly mastered. The material is ready to hand at little or no expense especially to those within reach of a library. The study can be pursued at home; it needs no laboratory, workshop or special apparatus. It can be carried on as well in town as in the country, in winter as in summer, by the weakling as well as by the most robust. Much can even be done in trains or trams, or in the intervals of a busy day. At the same time it is a living subject. Even as regards its past there is still much to be learnt, new light is constantly being thrown on the old problems, and new problems are constantly arising, to be met by new methods of investigation, and all the while new material is constantly being added in the literature of the day, which in its turn gains a fresh interest from a knowledge of that of the past from which it ultimately sprang.

THE ENGLISH COURSE AS IT IS.

Now, always remembering that the purpose of study is not, or should not be, the mere acquisition of a number of more or less obscure facts in order to pass an examination, let us consider the usual English course as it is to-day. It is evident that the details of the course will vary at the different educational centres, and there will be still more difference in the teaching itself. Methods of instruction in English are naturally much less fixed than in the case of a subject with a teaching tradition of centuries, such as Latin, or even of the more generally taught sciences such as physics or chemistry. Nevertheless we can, with due reservations, say fairly well what will at present be expected from a student who sits for a degree in English, and what will not be expected from him.

Instruction in English literature, and to some extent in the outlines of the history of the language, is generally begun in the secondary schools, but I do not propose to discuss the teaching in these, for there is nothing that can be called a 'usual' course, and, indeed, time could seldom be allowed for much specialization in English, even if this were desirable. It seems to me that the teaching of children to speak and write modern English with ease and correctness, and to appreciate good modern work in which the language presents no difficulty, should in a secondary school be the principal aim. Anything of an antiquarian nature, and especially such things as the memorizing of notes, or the discussion of obscure allusions or variant readings of texts should in any case be avoided. It is far better to encourage the average child to like good modern—I do not mean ultra-modern—poetry and fiction, and to give him a taste for reading which may afford him a vast amount of pleasure in after-life, than to run the risk of his leaving school with the idea that literature is a boring and difficult subject dealing with things written in crabbed language by people whose only merit is that of being dead.

Even supposing, however, that the student who takes up English as his special study at the University has read a certain number of English texts already, and to this extent is not altogether unprepared, he is unlikely to have done much of the detailed work to which he will now have to apply himself, and the subject will therefore be in the main a new one. Let us see what will be expected of him.

In the first place a certain number of works belonging to various periods of our literature will be 'set'. These set books will probably include one or more poems in Anglo-Saxon, or, as we now call it, Old English, with or without a portion of a 'Reader' consisting of mis-

cellaneous pieces from the same period ; certain works of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, including a selection from Chaucer ; and a larger number of more modern works ranging from the Elizabethan period to the nineteenth century. The student will be expected to get up these set books for examination purposes, that is to say that he must be prepared to translate the earlier ones and paraphrase the more difficult passages of the later into modern English, to explain allusions, to give contexts, and to state the more important external facts about the works in question and their authors. Further, he will be expected to acquire a general knowledge of English literary history, with possibly more detailed knowledge of some particular period. Lastly, an acquaintance with the history of the language from Anglo-Saxon times or earlier will at least be hoped for, as well as with the rudiments of philology in general.

The trouble is that if the student is taught by the usual methods, he does not get, and, in the time at his disposal, cannot possibly get this knowledge in a form in which it can have real educational value, for the ground to be covered is far too large and too diverse. A genuine understanding of all the subjects so glibly enumerated in the prospectus of a university course of English could not be acquired in double or ten times the amount of study that the average student can give to them, and the result of forcing so large a mass of strange material at one time on his notice is, as a general rule, merely to confuse him and to fill his mind with a collection of smatterings that it can neither digest nor retain.

Let us consider some of the subjects in a little more detail. To begin with, there is Old English. This would not be by any means an easy language even if we had only to study it as written at one time and in one place, and if we had before us a great mass of work set down in the form of a correct phonetic transcript of the language as actually spoken at that time and place. As a matter of fact, what has come down to us is a large number of texts representing the language as spoken at different times during some five hundred years and in a variety of places scattered over England, while to make matters worse, we have not, as a rule, the works in the form in which they were originally written, but transcripts made at varying later dates by scribes who lived in other parts of the country and who therefore spoke a more or less different dialect. The result is that almost all the manuscripts represent a mixture of different forms of the language. It is true that from the mass of these manuscripts scholars have been able to reconstruct the language as spoken in different dialects and at different times, but this is the labour of experts. The average student

may without any great difficulty succeed in mastering—for examination purposes—the set texts: that is to say that, given a piece of these texts, he will be able to give the modern English equivalent. Having done this he may be able to translate an exceptionally easy piece of similar work ‘unseen’, but he will certainly not be able to make much of a piece of work of a different kind. For example, he may have a thorough knowledge of the *Cura Pastoralis* and be able to read hardly a word of any Old English poem, or he may ‘know’ one poem, such as *Elene* or *Christ*, and yet be able to make nothing at all of *Beowulf* or *The Wanderer*. He will probably not have sufficient grasp of the language to translate into it the briefest passage of modern English. He has, in fact, not learnt the language at all but merely memorized the modern equivalents of the works he has studied.

And what else could be expected? The vocabulary of Old English is very large and the use of it curiously vague. It is often a matter of the greatest difficulty to discover any relation between the various uses of a word, and to get at what may be called the central idea, while especially in the case of the very frequent compound words the sense of the whole seems often to have little relation to that of the parts. But if it were only a question of a large vocabulary the difficulty could be got over by a good memory; the real trouble is that in most O.E. texts a word occurs in such a variety of forms that the student, by the study of the texts alone, never gets it clearly fixed in his mind. I am not, of course, referring to the varieties in the root vowels of a word which are caused by ‘ablaut’ or by the influence of inflections; these present a difficulty of their own but no greater than is to be found, for example, in modern German; but to the varieties in which the same tense or case of a word may occur in a single text.¹ It is perfectly true that a thorough study of O.E. phonology will make the relation of most of these forms clear enough to the student and by much use of dictionary and grammar he will in the end come to regard one form of a word as the normal and the others as variations from it; but this will be the result of the settling down of a great amount of work, and will certainly never come at all in the course of his ordinary studies for a degree.

¹ It may be well in order to make my meaning clear to those unacquainted with the language to take a few examples from *Beowulf*: thus the dative singular of *ieldo*, old age, appears as *ylde* and *eldo*: *iede*, easy, as *yde* and *ede*: the accusative of *isenbyrne*, an iron corslet, as *isernbyrnan* and *irenbyrnan*: the accusative sing. of *sweord*, sword, as *sweord*, *swurd* and *swyrd*: the third person pret. sing. of *gangan*, go, as *geong*, *giong*, and *gang*: the third pers. pret. sing. of *findan*, find, as *fand*, *fond*, and *funde*,—and so on: examples might be multiplied indefinitely.

Bad enough as is the result of studying Old English from two or three selected texts of some length, that of working from those so-called 'Readers' which contain short pieces in a variety of dialects and from all periods may well be far worse. Such a method greatly increases the difficulty to which I have just referred, for the student has hardly time to get to know even a few of the commonest words in one form of the language before he meets with them in another and quite different form. No sane person would try to teach English to a foreigner ignorant of the language by the aid of a book of selections consisting of snippets from Chaucer, Burns, the Authorized Version of the Bible, Anstey's *Voces Populi*, the Sam Weller passages of *Pickwick*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, and Masefield's *Everlasting Mercy*, and yet such a procedure would be only a little more absurd than to place in the hands of a beginner in Old English a Reader containing examples of the language taken from periods some four centuries apart, and from dialects extending from north of the Humber to Kent and from East Anglia to Wessex.

What is the result of feeding a student with assorted scraps of this sort? Practically this: whereas before he began his studies he had a definite and clear idea of English, so that to him 'son' meant a certain human relationship and 'sun' a certain celestial body, his idea of these two words has become surrounded by a sort of nebulous aura so that *sun*, *son*, *sonne*, *sone*, *sune*, *sunne*, *soun*, and probably also *suna*, *sunu*, *zonne* and a few others, will all seem to him merely equivalent forms to be interpreted as either 'son' or 'sun' according to the context. His idea of English has simply been shaken up and, so to speak, loosened. True, you have probably enabled him to translate, or let us rather say to guess, the modern equivalent of much that was incomprehensible to him before, but what is the educational value of a mere ability to translate? If it is only the 'meaning' of the works that the student requires, much better to give him ready-made translations at once and have done with it. The ability to puzzle out the meaning of a passage, say of Cynewulf, or even of the much easier Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, with frequent references to a Glossary for the hard words, and without a knowledge of the correct pronunciation or any real understanding of the verbal forms met with is, *if the student is to go no further*, utterly worthless in comparison of the time spent on learning to do it.

What is in the way is antiquarianism and a false idea of scholarship. If a man is to be trained as an expert in Old English, there is no harm in his studying it on the lines at present followed—though he would save time by working differently—but when the time to be

devoted to it is short the matter is otherwise. Then we must aim at a method which, whether it teaches much or little, must at any rate teach something definite, that is more or less complete in itself and that can be retained in the mind, not a mere collection of unco-ordinated scraps that could only be made available by much more extended study. I shall later make some suggestions as to how I think this might be done.

When we pass from Old English to Middle English the matter is in some respects worse. In the case of Old English there is as a general rule no great difficulty about pronunciation: the values given to the letters by the great majority of scribes were similar and a few simple rules suffice. When, however, in later times we have Norman scribes trying to reproduce English texts we may often be at a loss to know what were the sounds really intended. Again, there is no difficulty to the trained philologist, but we are dealing not with him but with the beginner, who finds a word taking a variety of forms and is simply confused among them.

The result is that no attempt is generally made either by the teacher or the student to read Middle English texts in accordance with the original pronunciation. Poetry is read with sufficient attention to the difference of stress and to the presence of final e's to preserve a certain amount of rhythm, and care will perhaps be taken to trill r in positions in which it is now silent, and to differentiate between wh and w, while, of course, an attempt will be made at the guttural sound of ȝ. What more is done depends on the idiosyncrasy of the teacher, but there will generally be only the vaguest knowledge of the true pronunciation, and even this will in working at the texts be ignored; the majority of words, especially those which approximate closely in form to modern English, being pronounced in the modern fashion.

Indeed, it is hard to see what else can be done. It is quite absurd to expect that the student who has to master a series of texts corresponding to four or five different states of the language, in no two of which texts the written forms are likely to have the same relation to the sounds that they represent, and no one of which is likely even to be consistent in spelling within itself, will acquire a sufficient knowledge of each stage of the language to ignore the forms of the words that he has before him and read his text as a contemporary. The most he can be expected to arrive at is an indefinite sort of queerness of pronunciation that will at any rate prevent what he reads from being mistaken for modern English.

I imagine that some will object that it does not matter how we read

Middle English, seeing that we read Latin with two different pronunciations in this country, and the Germans, French and Italians all pronounce it differently, while no one of these pronunciations even approximates to that of the time of Cicero. This would perhaps be a fair argument if, in the first place, we had a settled pronunciation, universally adopted throughout the country, for Middle English; and in the second place, if all our texts belonged to one time and one dialect as the Latin texts ordinarily studied do. Then if our studies were to be for literary purposes alone we could, I think, quite well adopt a fixed pronunciation regardless of whether it represented the original manner of speech or not.

But in the study of English everything is different. We are not studying a language at the height of its development but one in progress, and a great part of its interest, with perhaps all of its merit as an educational subject, lies in the tracing of this development. The history of a language is in the main and, as regards mediaeval times, almost entirely, the history of its pronunciation,¹ and without accuracy in pronunciation it is impossible for the student to get a clear idea—in fact any useful idea—of the changes in it as a whole. I believe that he could be given a knowledge of the language as actually spoken at certain selected dates in such a way that its history would be perfectly clear to him.

At present he does indeed learn something of the history of the language, but generally as a thing quite apart from the texts that he reads. In fact, most of the philology generally taught seems to be directed mainly to explaining the relationship between Old English and the other branches of the Germanic Group. A student will be able to give the history of original (hypothetical) Germanic vowels and consonants to the end of the Old English period and enumerate the 'laws' which summarize the influence upon each other of neighbouring sounds, and so on; but from this point onwards his knowledge is usually scrappy. The fact is that Middle English is such a mixture of dialects that only a genuine expert can find his way about in it. Of the relationship between the vowel system of Chaucerian English, that of, say, the Shakespearian period, and modern English, the average student will be quite ignorant, or at most he will have some vague ideas as to the changes in pronunciation of certain words to

¹ I do not mean to ignore 'semantics,' an interesting and fruitful study, but the changes in the meaning of words cannot, it seems to me, be satisfactorily investigated apart from their pronunciation, seeing that many changes of meaning are due to the influence of, or to confusion with, words of somewhat similar sound.

which his attention has, for some reason or other, been particularly drawn, without any general knowledge of the phonetic laws by which these changes are governed.

Of course, at the same time as he studies the language of the set books with a view of being able to translate them into modern English, the student will be expected to acquire a general knowledge of their subject-matter, the views held as to their authorship and the circumstances in which they were written, the allusions which they contain to contemporary events, the sources from which their authors drew inspiration and the like, in fact all the material generally to be found in the annotated editions. In practise, however, the general tendency seems to be to lay comparatively little stress on anything except language in dealing with the earlier works, and this even in the case of such a poem as *Piers Plowman*, the chief interest of which is as a commentary on the life and beliefs of its age.

When we come to the sixteenth century the circumstances are different. The language of Shakespeare is sufficiently near, in outward semblance, to modern English for it to be possible to discard the contemporary spelling and to transcribe the texts into that of our own day. Practically all work done by the ordinary student on texts from 1550 onwards is done on so-called modernized texts in which both spelling and punctuation have been made to accord with modern practice; and, as a rule, no attempt whatever is made to treat the language as something with an existence of its own; it is regarded as modern English with a few queer words and queer phrases which need explanation. An alien language is forced upon Shakespeare just as truly as an alien stage, and his work suffers by it.

For the general reader there is, of course, no other way; but this method of reading Shakespeare is a very great hindrance to a student whose business it is to obtain a connected view of the development of our language and literature. It is not necessary here to urge the point, for any that have agreed with me so far will certainly agree in this.

In studying the set books of this period the language is then, as a rule, ignored or passed over as lightly as possible, except for the explanation of actual difficulties, the student's attention being directed mainly to the external history of the works dealt with, to the allusions to contemporary persons and events, and to the explanation of obscure passages. An attempt may also perhaps be made at aesthetic criticism, at any rate in connexion with Shakespeare, but how much time is devoted to this will depend very much upon the teacher.

Later texts are, of course, treated pretty much as those of the

sixteenth century, save that there will be less to say about the meaning of words or phrases, for there will be little or nothing strange to the reader. Subject-matter and topical allusions will come in for a still greater share of attention, but as a rule the student is left to work at these texts for himself with the aid of annotated editions.

To turn now from the study of texts to that of literary history in general. I believe that as an instrument of education English literary history as usually taught must be regarded as a failure, chiefly on account of its narrowness and provincialism. It is far too much a matter of remembering unimportant details about the lives and quarrels of writers—most of which have no bearing whatever on the work for which the writers are remembered. It is stuff that can be got up for an examination, but that, once the examination is over, passes from the student's memory without leaving a trace. Furthermore, quite an extraordinary proportion of the statements made in general histories of English literature with regard to works and writers earlier than the seventeenth century rests on evidence so slender that there is hardly any other subject in which it would be accepted as of value. Much of it is a heritage from the days of uncritical compilers whose hastiest statements have come to be accepted almost as if inspired. Indeed, modern critical work has been very largely directed to the destruction of hitherto accepted views and to showing how little is to be regarded as really certain.

But the chief fault of the majority of text-books and of the ordinary teaching is that on the one hand far too much knowledge of detail as regards English literature is expected, and on the other too little attention is paid to those historical and social conditions which moulded that literature, and to the European literature of which it was in early days a comparatively unimportant branch. The relationship between English and continental literature varied, of course, at different periods, but it is not too much to say that at least until 1600 English literature can only be effectively and educatively studied as a part of European literature generally; without a knowledge of that—and not a knowledge of names alone, but of the works themselves—its development cannot be understood.

This does not imply that the surviving English literature of certain periods may not be more important than the surviving continental literature of the same period, for this depends on the accident of preservation. Among the examples of Old English literature is, indeed, the most important example of early Germanic epic, but this is due to the chance survival of the single MS. of *Beowulf*. Studied by itself *Beowulf* throws no light whatever on English literature.

Neither the scenes nor the characters are English, and the poem as a whole is of Scandinavian or, at least, continental ancestry, even though it may have been actually composed on English soil. As one, and from its date the most important among the survivals of a great epic literature *Beowulf* is of the deepest interest, but as a rule little or no attempt is made to give the student any real knowledge of this literature as a whole.

The same thing is the case with the later Old English poetry, that which is more markedly Christian. It is not in any real sense English but is a part of the Christian literature of Europe.

But even more when we come to deal with the literature of the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries is it impossible to treat English literature as a subject by itself. So treated it is hardly more than a mass of unrelated fragments, and study of it can merely lead to the filling of the mind with disconnected facts of little interest or educational value. Very different, however, is the result of studying the development of north European literature as a whole during the period. It is then easy to observe the development of the various tendencies and the great groupings of legendary subject-matter. A real intelligible history of this literature as a whole is possible, and the English part of it falls into its place, the apparently disconnected fragments being shown to represent various branches the relationship of which is clear. The study of English literature by itself is something like a study of botany which should be restricted to the flowers that happen to be growing in a single suburban garden.

What can be made of the English representatives alone of the Arthurian Legend, of the Charlemagne romance, of the Troy romance, of the beast-epic, or, indeed, of the English representatives of any of the great continental motives of story, but a collection of unrelated scraps? The student is no doubt told that for much of the English work there are foreign origins and these are probably named, but as a rule he has not read a line of them and knows nothing—or at least is not required to know anything—of their history and interconnexions.

Worst of all the Latin literature of the Middle Ages is usually ignored altogether, though it is in reality the connecting framework of the whole, and a constant source from which writers in the vernacular obtained their material.

But even supposing that for the study of our earlier literature as a thing apart and self-contained we could substitute a study of European literature in general with English as a particular branch, would this be sufficient to render 'middle English' a satisfactory educational

subject? Not, I think, if it is studied solely as literature. If we are honest with ourselves we must, I think, confess that, however much of interest there may be in English mediaeval literature, there is remarkably little that shows a trace of inspiration or can even be placed in the first or second rank on the ground of literary technique. Our students would indeed gain something by an acquaintance, however superficial, with the literature of France, Italy and Germany. Here they would at least find in some of the work a high level of sincerity, a breadth of intelligence and a nobility of conception, to say nothing of technical skill, which places it in an altogether different category from such compilations and adaptations as Layamon's *Brut*, *Havelok*, and the *Cursor Mundi*, or, indeed, from almost anything produced in England before the time of Chaucer. But this incidental gain would still hardly justify us in offering to the younger generation a knowledge of a mass of second or third-rate stuff such as makes up nine-tenths of Middle English on the pretence that we are educating them.

If, however, the study of early English literature be held to be not merely the study of the imperfect beginnings of our literary art and technique, but of those forces which are the creators and maintainers of literary art and technique and which determine its development, namely human belief and intellect as conditioned by time and society, we at once raise our subject to one of the very highest in educational value. If instead of taking literature by itself we study it as a manifestation of something greater; if we can make clear to our students that thus and thus did the thought of Europe change, and thus and thus is the change shown in its literature, we are genuinely teaching something: we are, indeed, teaching them that most valuable of all ideas, namely the possibility of different outlooks upon life.

But it will perhaps be objected that what I am advocating is really the study of history, not of literature. It is certainly the study of a kind of history, but of that kind which seems at present to be most neglected, namely the history of ideas, and of general conceptions of life. With so-called political history, that which deals with kings and wars and treaties, literature is only occasionally concerned, but with social and even more with intellectual history it is very greatly concerned indeed. And the teaching need not be very abstruse nor very detailed. The main thing is to keep a due sense of proportion and not to treat the purely local events of our own island as of supreme importance at a time when the intellectual centre of the world was elsewhere. The teaching of history on sounder lines will at any rate add very much to the students' respect for men of earlier ages as rational beings, and rid them of the absurd fancy that everything that does not accord

with the present-day ideas should be dismissed as ignorance and superstition.¹

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORM.

The remedy which I venture to propose for the present unsatisfactory state of English study is its entire reorganization on lines which I shall now proceed to set down.

First, however, let me say that I do not pretend to offer a course in English of universal application. Such a thing would naturally be impossible. A course suitable for a student who is to end his school-life at eighteen or nineteen would naturally be a very different thing from one for a student who intends to take honours in the subject at a university. Unfortunately, however, we by no means always know how far a student will carry his studies in the subject, for even those who intend to pursue the study to a degree standard may for one reason or another have to break off at an earlier point. It is, therefore, necessary so to arrange matters that, as far as possible and with reasonable reservations, the course shall be, if I may use the phrase, continuously complete. Any student who at least goes through with the immediate part of the course on which he has entered must always have learnt something which, so far as it goes, is complete in itself—if it be only the merest outline—and not a collection of beginnings, and must have learnt it so thoroughly that it will have become a part of himself. If in later life he has inclination and opportunity to proceed further, he must find it at least a useful foundation.

Now I venture to think that, if taught on the lines that I propose, the subject is quite capable of being broken up in the way indicated, indeed, far more easily so broken up than as generally taught at present, and even if a student who drops the subject at a very early stage may have learnt little or nothing of what is usually understood by 'English' he will at least have learnt something quite worth learning and likely to be remembered. It will, however, be impossible for me here to indicate the kind of modifications that will be needed for special cases, and it must be understood that I am only attempting to deal with the matter as a whole. I have assumed that the study of English language and literature from the historical side will not begin much before the age of fifteen or sixteen, and have supposed a continuous course in

¹ Perhaps I had better say that I have no wish to advocate a raid by the teacher of 'English' on the province of the teacher of 'History'. By all means let this part of the subject be taught as 'history' if the history teacher can and will undertake it. On this side there is no real dividing line between the two subjects and none should be drawn.

it carried on up to a B. A. standard. If it were begun much earlier many modifications would be necessary. Much of the ground would have to be gone over twice or even thrice, taking only the broadest outlines first and filling in the details later. So too, if we knew that the student had no intention of taking a full course in the subject. In such a case the linguistic side of the teaching might perhaps be dropped altogether. There would at any rate be little use in teaching Old English to one who would not proceed to the study of later forms of the language. But that such modifications may be necessary will, I think, be understood without more explanation.

Further, in order to guard against misapprehension, I should perhaps say, once for all, that I do not propose to discuss the aesthetic side of English teaching. This is by no means because I undervalue it, far from it, but because, so far as I can see, all the aesthetic training that it is possible for the student to receive can be worked into the present course—indeed, into almost any course—of English. It is much less a question of what one teaches than of how one teaches it. Indeed, for aesthetic training alone it seems to me that we need nothing whatever beyond modern work and work which, being accessible in translation or in modernized forms, can be treated as modern. Of what use for this is linguistic study or literary history as usually understood? Dates do not matter, authors do not matter: nothing matters but the works as we have them now. The fewer the difficulties of language and interpretation that intervene between the subjects of our study and ourselves the better. But aesthetic training, however important, is not the whole of education.

Such training there must certainly be, and plenty of it, but other things besides; and because the desirability of aesthetic training seems to me to be generally acknowledged, even though there may sometimes be room for improvement in the methods employed, it is on these other things that I lay most stress in what follows.

In the first place the course of study should be separated into two distinct stages. The first, the absorptive stage, which we will call elementary (though I claim that a student who has been through it will have a much better knowledge of the subject than the average advanced student of to-day) will be characterized on the positive side by a far more thorough grounding in the historical and social background of literature, by a much closer attention to what is called comparative literature, and by a more careful training in the language as spoken and written at certain well-defined periods of our history than is customary at present; and on the negative side by the complete disregard of what may be called problems of transmission or, in other

words, by the avoidance of all those special difficulties which arise from the way in which our early literature has been handed down to us.

In the second or advanced stage, or stage of research, the student will receive definite preparation for the study of original texts. We will take these two stages in their order.

If literature is, as it is generally held to be, a reflection of life, there can surely be no profitable study of it without some knowledge of that life of which it is the reflection. When we are dealing with the literature of a foreign country we acknowledge this readily enough. Who, for example, would attach any weight to the judgement upon Chinese literature of an Englishman who did not know that the social life and habits of thought of the Chinese differed from those of his own countrymen, and how they differed? But when we are dealing with our own literature of a past age we seem to forget this and to expect our students to arrive at a real knowledge and appreciation of the works of former times by studying those works alone, independent of their environment. This is surely wrong. There must be a basis of historical knowledge. The students need know little of the superficial kind of history which deals with wars and politics, but they *must* know something of the great changes in life and thought which accompanied and inspired the literature with which they are to deal.

The students should therefore, I think, first be put through some such course of general history as I shall attempt to sketch later. This should be illustrated so far as possible by references to literature, which should at this stage be treated purely as illustrative matter, with no discussion of authors or style or inter-relationship. At this point it is history, not literature that we are teaching.

At the same time the aesthetic side of the study should be pursued with the aid of modern literature or, when necessary, translations of older works; the object being to give the students a general idea of literature in its chief developments and to lead them to find pleasure in it.

Next should come the stage of literary history proper; and this should throughout be treated with constant reference to the history which has already been studied. It must be taught on the broadest lines. I shall go more into detail later, but I should like at this point to insist that we must keep a due proportion in our teaching, and remembering that we have a vast period to cover, must not break up the impression of continuity by devoting in the general course too much attention to particular authors and works, however important these may be.

At the same time as we are teaching our general literary history the students must study particular examples chosen from various

periods. Here, I think a radical change of practice is necessary. Our background of literary history must be even and continuous, but our points of particular study must be limited in number and distinct from one another. At present an attempt is often made to introduce the student to a more or less continuous series of texts extending from early times to the present day. I think that we should at first concentrate on some three or four periods of our language and literature, and study texts chosen from these periods with far greater thoroughness and, if I may use the term, 'actuality' than is now usual, so that the students may arrive at a real understanding of the language and literature of the particular periods chosen. If they continue their studies, they will be able to fill the gaps. If not, they will at least have learnt something well.

To explain more fully we may outline an English course somewhat as follows.

So far as general history is concerned the student will begin, say, with a summary knowledge of the extent and general political relations of the Roman Empire in the time of Augustus, of the distribution of peoples in Europe at that period and of the changes in this distribution which took place during the decline of the Empire. He will learn little or nothing of particular Emperors or Popes but will be given a general knowledge of the spread of Christianity in Europe, the development of the various intellectual centres, and the change in importance of various parts of Europe, so that he will be able to say what countries or what towns took the lead at various times in the development of civilization, and what were the characteristics of their particular activity. He will watch also the change in languages which accompanied the change in the predominant civilization, the gradual thrusting westward of the Celtic group and the varied fortunes of Germanic and Romance—all this of course in broad outline only.

He will have to know something of the history of the Christian Church and its schisms, and of the broad differences of feeling and outlook on the world to which these schisms correspond.

He will learn of the gradual extension of the known world in the Middle Ages and something of the main routes of commerce, and of the gradual improvement in means of communication with the consequent quickening of the interaction of nation upon nation.

A general account of the chief scientific and philosophical theories of the Middle Ages will form part of the course, so that the student may come to understand something of the greatness of the mediaeval idea of Christianity, and how that idea by the very perfection of its self-sufficing completeness, by its sole preoccupation with revealed religion, and by its conception of a world created and conducted

entirely for the ultimate benefit of man, came to place authority on so high a pedestal as to retard intellectual and moral progress for more than a thousand years.

And later he will learn of the re-awakening to the actual physical world which is called the Renaissance, and will trace its spread from country to country, nor merely as a renewed study of classical authors, but as the beginning of a new set of ideas, of liberation from the past and a new sense of a right to personal ideas and achievement.

He will learn also of the changes in the habits and manners of life of the people from period to period and of the relation of class to class; and something of their education, so that he may realize—however imperfectly—the kind and extent of knowledge that would be expected, say, from a gentleman of rank, a prosperous merchant or a peasant at different times in our history.

All this is, of course, general history. When we come to literature itself we may be rather more precise.

In the first place it is absolutely essential that a student of English literature should have read the important works of the Latin writers. It is not in the least essential that he should read them in the original, but a student to whom Virgil, Cicero, Ovid, Terence, Juvenal and Horace¹ are no more than names cannot hope to attain a real understanding of the development of modern literature. With Greek the case is rather different: it is mainly the lesser men such as Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius of whom a knowledge is required. The dramatists and Homer are of little direct importance—save, indeed, for comparison or contrast—until we come to quite modern times, and Aristotle and Plato influenced modern literature more through their interpreters (or misinterpreters) than at first hand.

When I say that Latin writers may be studied in translation I do not mean to imply that a knowledge of Latin is unnecessary, for to anyone who wishes to make more than the most superficial study of English, it is obviously quite essential. Without it he certainly cannot attain to any thorough knowledge of the mediaeval period; but there is the question of time. We cannot demand a classical scholar's knowledge of Latin from every student of English, but we may fairly insist that if a student cannot read the Latin authors of the classical period in the original he shall do so in translations. The objection to translations is of all kinds of pedantry one of the most foolish.

As he follows the history of literature he must read the great continental works also—in the original, of course, if he can, but if not, in translations. He must read something—not necessarily the whole—of certain of the French *Chansons de Gestes*, the *Nibelungenlied*,

¹ We should probably include Pliny the Elder and Plautus.

some Icelandic sagas, some of the Arthurian legends and the like ; or, if he will, he may save time by reading at least some of these in a boiled-down form in Cox and Jones' *Popular Romances of the Middle Ages*, or W. Wagner's *Epics and Romances of the Middle Ages*, to mention two of the older works of this class : and he should not be ignorant of such widely influential collections of legend and story as the *Gesta Romanorum* and the *Legenda Aurea*. He should read the whole of the *Divina Commedia* and perhaps the *Vita Nuova*, but without spending too much time over the commentaries thereon. At present the student will perhaps find it rather difficult to gain an all-round knowledge of the mediæval literature of the continent by means of translations alone, not so much because these do not exist as because they are scattered and not readily accessible. A few carefully selected examples, however, will do much in conjunction with such a historical sketch as he may easily find, to familiarize him with the main characteristics of that literature.

The literature of the Renaissance will present fewer difficulties, as most of what is of first-rate importance is quite readily obtainable in an English form. It is not necessary to lay down any exact programme of study, but it will, I think, be agreed that anyone who aims at a good understanding of English literature of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries should at least have some knowledge of Petrarch, Boccaccio, the French mystères, Rabelais, Ariosto, Montaigne and the writers of La Pléiade. It is also most desirable, if not indeed essential, that he should be acquainted with certain of the Latin works of the humanists, amongst which the *Colloquia* of Erasmus and the *Encomium Moriae* at least shall be read. Luckily the last two works are accessible in cheap translations. It is not necessary that the student should be overburdened with an immense amount of reading, but a good knowledge of a few representative works, or even of selected portions of them, combined with such instruction as will call his attention to their essential characteristics and inter-relations, is worth infinitely more than mere descriptions or summaries.

The continental literature of the last three centuries stands in a somewhat different relation to that of England. In the first place a distinctively national literature had grown up here, which was no longer so closely allied to that of the Continent ; and secondly the very numerous examples of continental influence which are to be found in it are for the most part obvious at sight. They take the form generally of acknowledged translations and adaptations, and though a general knowledge of the development of French and German literature at least will greatly aid the student in the understanding of

his main subject, he will as a rule by paying some attention to such translations or adaptations as he comes across in any period, obtain an adequate knowledge of the main directions in which continental literature influenced English. It is, of course, desirable on general grounds that the student of English should know the work of Corneille, Racine, and Molière, of Schiller and Goethe, but this will help him less in the understanding of English than a knowledge of such critics as Boileau and Lessing, or such philosophers as Descartes, Voltaire, and Rousseau. In the case, however, of works which are important, as theirs are, mainly on account of the thought or the point of view, a good summary or description can much better take the place of the original than in more purely 'literary' work.

We now come to the study of the English works themselves—the texts—and here I have to make a suggestion that, I fear, will horrify some of my readers. It amounts to no less than the re-writing of the chosen texts in a normalized (phonetic) spelling, and the complete neglect, in the elementary course, of the form in which they have come down to us.

The essential thing to be held in view first, last, and all the time is that language is a matter of sounds, not of written symbols. The development of the sounds of English, of the spoken word, can be traced from age to age by the help of definite phonetic laws, and a clear and consistent picture of this development can be presented. The change in the written form of words is quite otherwise. This also is, of course, subject to laws, but to a far smaller extent and in a very different way. For more than half the period over which our study of 'English' extends, the writing down of the language was done by a very minute percentage of those who used it, and even so the writers were in many cases of foreign origin, and had their own peculiar ways of representing the English sounds. And then when we come to printing, which one might have supposed would quickly lead to standardization, we find on the one hand new spellings which are probably due to Dutch or German compositors, and on the other the deliberate retention of alternative forms to facilitate justification of the lines of type. Lastly, throughout there is the influence of the classical scholar, hankering after his, often imaginary, etymologies, and trying to bring back our unhappy tongue, at least in its written form, to what he supposes to be correct. The effect of all these disturbing forces on the natural development of our spelling has been, as is well recognized, so great that it almost seems to be haphazard. It is impossible to work out any satisfactory history of it; and in any case it is not our language, but only an exceedingly bad method of recording it.

I would in the first place advocate the teaching of phonetics as an essential preliminary to any linguistic study whatever; and the practising of the student in transcribing modern English into the chosen phonetic alphabet.¹ Those who think there is any difficulty about the elementary study of phonetics can never have tried it. The ability to use even the simplest phonetic alphabet is of incalculable assistance, not only in the study of one's own language at different periods, by enabling one to note down the pronunciation of any word in a way which will allow one afterwards at any time to reproduce it, but also and even more in the study of any foreign language, and it is nothing less than shameful that an instrument of such utility should be denied to the majority of our students merely because so many of the older generation of teachers never troubled to master it.

When the student has a sufficient knowledge of the sounds represented by the various letters of the phonetic alphabet—a matter of very few hours' tuition and practice—he can begin to work at the earlier texts. These will be presented to him in such a normalized form that, reading them as he reads his phonetic modern English, he will pronounce the words approximately² as they were pronounced at the time when the work was written, and learn the language as a genuine *spoken one*.

So far as Old English is concerned the transcription into a phonetic alphabet will cause little change in the general appearance of the text

¹ It has been suggested to me that I should illustrate this part of the Paper by some examples of early texts re-written phonetically; but I think it better not to do so, as I do not wish to advocate the adoption of any particular variety of phonetic alphabet. The selection of this should, I think, be matter for consideration and experiment by a small committee of philological and phonetic experts. None of the current alphabets seems altogether suitable for the purpose. The existing attempts to reproduce the original pronunciation of Chaucer and Shakespeare are for the most part either in Ellis's 'Palaeotype' or in the alphabet of the International Phonetic Association, both of which systems were designed to furnish symbols for a much larger variety of sounds than we should require, with the result that they use a number of unusual forms of letters, and transcripts in them appear at first sight rather startling. Probably Sweet's much simpler 'Broad Romic' with the addition of a few diacritics or new letters to represent the sounds of earlier periods would be found quite adequate. Our aim should be to use the simplest notation compatible with reasonable accuracy.

² I do not, of course, claim that the use of a phonetic alphabet will by itself enable a reader to reproduce speech with perfect correctness, but merely that the methods of transcription proposed will conduce to a uniform, consistent pronunciation which is, at any rate, very much nearer to being correct than we could obtain by following the irregular spelling of the MSS., and will at the same time enable us to form a much clearer idea of the workings of phonetic laws through the centuries than we could do otherwise.

—especially if Sweet's Broad Romic is adopted. The difference will be mostly in certain consonants and, of course, in the general uniformity of the whole.

Middle English will, however, show much greater difference from the spelling of the MSS. owing to increased irregularity in the scribal practice; and the English of Shakespeare even more.

The advantages claimed for such a method are:

1. The student learns something which approaches the real language of the various periods, not a travesty of it dependent on the pronunciation of his particular teacher.
2. He sees how pronunciation varies from period to period, and philology becomes a real science to him instead of a set of arbitrary rules.
3. He is not worried by a variety of forms in the same text that teach him nothing and simply prevent him from getting a definite idea of the word.

The first and most obvious objection to the method proposed is perhaps that our knowledge of English is not sufficient to enable us to re-write texts with complete accuracy into the pronunciation of their authors.

This is, no doubt, true; there are certain texts of which the transmission has been so bad that we cannot say when or where they were written, and in any text one may find occasional words the correct (usual) pronunciation of which is a matter of some doubt.¹ But this surely is of little importance. It is not proposed that *all* texts should be re-written phonetically, and those of which the transmission is very bad are just those which one is least likely to wish to put before elementary students. In the case of the other texts we have to take the risk of being occasionally wrong in the form adopted; but even so, the result will only be that the students mispronounce a word here and there instead of, as at present, mispronouncing *all* of them. Besides, in the present state of philology the number of phonetic errors will certainly not be more than the errors of spelling which are now made in a text edited from several manuscripts, seeing that the phonetic equivalents are deduced from known and proven laws whereas the *form* of a word depends on the idiosyncrasy of a particular scribe.

Any objection on the score of arbitrary interference with traditional forms seems to me to be mere pedantry. The way in which an anonymous scribe chose to write a particular sound may be a matter

¹ Sometimes also we may meet with the more troublesome case of a sound which was in process of change at the date of the work with which we are dealing, with the result that alternative pronunciations of certain words would be in use together and equally correct. We must then simply choose one and stick to it.

of interest to *advanced* students, but it is not a thing that deserves any particular regard, and it certainly need not concern a beginner. There is no possible breach of faith in departing from it.

After all, the tampering with the old texts here proposed is hardly a new thing. Our texts are already tampered with, though to less purpose. We do not now present them even to the advanced student in the form in which they have come down to us. The various handwritings of the MSS. are normalized into a readable print in which the shapes of the letters are uniform; not even the original spellings are kept, for we generally expand the contractions. We go even further than this in many students' texts, for we introduce corrections and emendations; we break up a continuously written text into lines of verse, and sometimes construct an altogether new text by the collation of several MSS. In the case of writers of the sixteenth century and later we introduce a spelling and punctuation quite different from that of the original.

Lastly, if it be argued that a student, who has studied, say, Chaucer in a phonetic transcript, would find the traditional spelling a hindrance when he comes to do original work I can only say that I do not believe it. Personal experience has shown me that the use of a phonetic spelling in teaching modern English to foreign students does not lead in any way to confusion. I have never found the slightest tendency to confound the phonetic with the conventional spelling. The phonetic spelling seems to be associated solely with the sound of the word, and whatever errors the student may make in the conventional spelling, he appears never to substitute the phonetic one. All that seems necessary to avoid this confusion is that the phonetic spelling should be *really* a phonetic one, not a half and half makeshift. If a student is told that 'calf' is pronounced 'carf' he *may* spell it so: if he is told that the phonetic equivalent is 'kaaf' he will not be at all likely to make a similar error.

Of course such a method of teaching implies a good deal of new work. In the first place the teacher will need a far more precise and extensive knowledge of the progress of linguistic change than he generally has at present, and a certain number of new text-books will be required, but the first requirement can hardly be regarded as an argument against the proposal, and the provision of new text-books is neither difficult nor, even now, very expensive. It would probably not be necessary that students should read a great bulk of literature re-written on phonetic principles; for learning, as they would, the correct pronunciation from the very first with ease and certainty, they would be spared all the confusion and vagueness which is now common. The language of each of the periods which they would

study would be at once definite and distinct; as definite and distinct as are, for example, Latin and modern Italian, and they would be regarded—as they should be—as manners of speech and not manners of writing.

Few texts would suffice, for, at any rate in elementary teaching, the periods selected must show sufficient changes in the language for the student easily to keep them distinct. The details of the course would naturally to some extent depend on the results of experiment, for there are several points upon which differences of opinion are likely to arise. I would suggest that the following might be for the average student the most suitable scheme.

Let him begin with Old English, taking first perhaps a brief series of single sentences and short passages, written, of course, in the chosen phonetic script, which need by no means be genuine early texts. These could be accompanied by instruction in grammar and in the peculiarities of the language, which should, I think, in the first instance, be taught as a foreign—or shall we say independent—language without reference to modern English. We cannot forbid the student to notice that some of the words are very like words of the same meaning in modern English, any more than we can when he is studying German, but we must be careful not to insist on the resemblance, lest, if we do, he comes to regard Old English (subconsciously of course) as merely a perverted form of the English of to-day. Especially must we avoid the extraordinary and most absurd habit, formerly perhaps more common than at present, of translating Old English words by modern words which are, indeed, etymologically their descendants but now have an altogether different meaning.¹ Nothing can tend more strongly to give an air of unreality to the whole subject.

The student, having been given a rough idea of the general character of the language, can now attack his first long text. What this should be must depend to some extent on his age. In many ways a prose text forms a better beginning for the study of a language than a verse one, but unfortunately there is little Old English prose that can be regarded as sufficiently interesting to hold the attention of any but the most earnest worker, and it is quite possible that *Elene*, *Christ*, or even a selection from *Beowulf* would be more suitable for our purpose. In any case the total amount of material which the student has to read must be sufficient to familiarize him with all the commoner words.

¹ E.g., *mōd* (mind, courage) translated as 'mood', or even worse, *mōdig* (brave) translated as 'moody'. The same objection applies to translation by antiquated words, as *rod* (the Cross) translated 'rōod'; *sweart* (black, gloomy) translated 'swart'; *stede* (place) as 'stead', &c., &c.

Being relieved from all confusion and uncertainty arising from varying forms he should attain an adequate vocabulary much more quickly than by the usual method, but no way of learning a language will dispense with time and trouble.

It will, I think, be a great help to the student, besides assisting him to regard Old English as a genuine language, if he is given occasional exercises in translating modern English into Old. Such exercises may not only be made the means of providing examples of grammatical rules, but also of familiarizing him with common or philologically important words which do not happen to occur in the texts which he is studying.

The next stage in the course should, I think, be the language of Chaucer, but this should not be attempted until the student is so thoroughly familiar with Old English that there is no longer the least danger of his confusing the forms of the two. Fortunately, in the case of Chaucer the selection of material is an easier matter than in that of Old English, as any of the works which are usually read will serve the purpose well enough. The student will, of course, have these chosen works presented to him in the phonetic script to which he is well accustomed, and using from the beginning the correct pronunciation, will probably find the language present little difficulty.

About this time systematic instruction in the history of the language might begin, the student being given a general idea of the relationship of the languages within the Germanic group, all words being, of course, presented to him as sounds, or in the phonetic script adopted. He will also be in a position to learn something of the phonetic laws governing the sound changes between Old English and the fourteenth century, but this subject can hardly at the present stage be gone into in detail.

The next step should be the English of Shakespeare, presented in a similar way as sound alone. The student will, of course, in all probability be already familiar, in modern spelling, with the plays which he now reads with the old pronunciation, but it is difficult to see how this can inconvenience him. Had he attempted previously to read Shakespeare in a non-modern pronunciation he might have found his new reading confusing, but he is quite unlikely to have done this.

The student has now acquired three separate languages, which should be sufficiently distinct and definite in his mind to be remembered without danger of confusion. He should be able without a moment's hesitation to give the sound-form of any common English word as it was at any one of these periods, and should be able to express a simple modern phrase in a form which, if perhaps not exactly

colloquial or usual, would at any rate have been intelligible to Cynewulf, Chaucer or Shakespeare; and if he can do this he will have a very much better idea of the development of the language than the great majority of those who are called advanced students in English at the present day.

Further, he will be in a position to increase his knowledge. Having the three points to which all that he learns further may be referred, he will find it a comparatively easy matter to fill in the gaps, both in the matter of pure philology and in the study of texts.

The question arises what is the next step. Should he be content with these three distinct forms of the language, and in future study neglect the niceties of pronunciation and proceed to work with the traditional texts alone? It seems to me that this is a question which must be solved by experience. Those students who are later to proceed to more advanced study of the language might perhaps with profit familiarize themselves with two or perhaps three other forms of it in phonetic script, namely Early Middle English in the form, say, of a selection from Layamon; later fifteenth century prose represented by Malory, or the Caxton Troy-Book; and lastly, the English of the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century as represented by Dryden or Pope. There is, however, an evident objection in giving to the ordinary student as many as five or six different forms of the language to study consecutively, and it is probable that a better result might be obtained by concentrating on the three periods first mentioned and afterwards going back and bridging the gaps by the study of short phonetically transcribed texts accompanied by more advanced philological study.

The question whether we need ever set the ordinary student to work at the regular MS. texts can, I think, be answered in the negative. In the great majority of cases he will not wish to proceed further with reading texts after his course is finished, and if he does, the ordinary texts will present little or no difficulty to him, for they will only offer unusual spellings of words with which he is already familiar, just such a trifling difficulty as one meets with on reading, for the first time, the text of Shakespeare in the spelling of one of the early quartos. Then, too, if this method of normalizing became usual, all the important texts would in a short time be available in this form, just as all the classical texts are available in a normal form, and all the chief Elizabethan plays in modern spelling.

Of course, if the student is himself to become a teacher of English literature, it is advisable that he should go further. In a University course such phonetic methods as I have been describing might then perhaps end with the second year out of three (or, better, the third year

out of four), and the remaining year be spent in the rudiments of what I have called advanced work, that part of the work which is more especially concerned with questions of transmission. Those again who intend to engage in investigation on their own account, and not merely in the imparting to others of what is already known, will need to go further still. For them an advanced course, most of it necessarily post-graduate, will be desirable.

In such an advanced course the method of approaching the subject should be in some respects altogether different from that of the elementary course. The purpose would no longer be to put the student in possession of the main outlines of the knowledge already gained, but to show him how that knowledge was arrived at and to enable him to add to it. He would, of course, have to widen and deepen his general elementary knowledge in all directions, but he would have in addition, as a special subject of study, the question of the relation between the literary work which has come down to us and that work as composed by its original author—the question of transmission.

As regards literary and general history nothing need be said. Further study will grow naturally out of the elementary work. The student will merely require a closer and more detailed knowledge of what he has already learnt in outline. His knowledge of the history of ideas may well be broadened by some more special study of the history of philosophy and of science, but this can be left without too close definition. If he can obtain a general familiarity with the literary development of another age—especially that of Greek and Roman literature, or of some non-European group, it will almost certainly be of assistance to him.

As regards linguistics. He will, of course, have to fill the gaps between the typical periods studied, and will also have to study more in detail the relations between the development of English and that of other languages of the group. He may also be required to know something of the different dialects and their development, all of which, however, will be a much simpler matter now that he has certain fixed points to which everything can be related, than it would be otherwise. If he can find time and energy to study, even in an elementary fashion, some language altogether outside the European group he will, I think, find that this will very considerably help him, not only by broadening his views, but by forcing him to a closer and more careful consideration of the real meaning and implication of the grammatical forms of which he makes use. When, for example, one studies such a language as Chinese or Japanese, one finds that it is no longer a case of translating one word by another word, but of getting at the idea underlying

an English phrase and reproducing this from an altogether different point of view. Such an exercise will give him, in perhaps an even better manner, that precise understanding of the meaning of his own language which is rightly claimed as resulting from the practice of Latin prose composition.

In all these points, however, the ordinary courses of study and the text-books in general use, with that additional clearness of understanding that his knowledge of phonetics gives him, will serve him well enough, especially as the puzzling out of things for himself in face of difficulties will be a useful part of his training. It is in its way of treating, or rather of neglecting, questions of transmission of text that the present course of study is in general most deficient. In this department we need a careful and systematic study of the relation between the text in the form in which we have it and the text as it would have been *spoken* (*dictated*) or *read aloud* by its original composer. In its widest sense this is the science of textual criticism. It includes all such things as the means of appraising the relative value of different texts, the recognition of probable errors, scribal or typographical, and the method of weeding out such errors and getting back as nearly as possible to the original text exactly as it was first composed. For this a number of things are necessary that are seldom or never systematically taught to students of English. To begin with, as the first stage in the preservation of literature is usually in writing, the student must have a general reading acquaintance with the ordinary scripts of different periods, not only in order that he may himself be in a position to work from MSS., but that he may be able to judge of likely errors in copying from one MS. to another. He will then, at least, be able to avoid the common mistake of supposing that if two words look somewhat alike in the writing of to-day, they were necessarily similar to one another in a mediaeval or renaissance script, and likely to be confused by a copyist. And he must know more about MSS. than the mere hand-writing. He must know how and under what conditions, and by what class of men they were commonly written, for the particular trend of a man's ordinary thoughts and occupations will influence the errors that he makes. He must also know something about actual materials and processes of writing, and the gathering of leaves of a manuscript into book-form, for anything which will enable him to follow more closely in his mind the actual process of the coming into being of the manuscript, and to judge of its rank as good and careful or slovenly and cheap work, will help him in the consideration of its probable authority as a text. Especially also must he have some general knowledge of the nationality of the scribes at different times, so that

he can detect the work, for example, of a French scribe whose own language may influence him in the direction of certain peculiarities in transcribing English, peculiarities which must then be ignored in considering the text which has been transcribed, just as we ignore the mis-spellings and other curiosities of language that we may find, for example, in an English phrase occurring in a French novel.

Further, as the advanced student of English often has more to do with texts of which the earliest surviving form is in print, he must have a general knowledge of the methods of printing and the manufacture of books in early times. This is, indeed, for the student of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature of even more importance than a knowledge of manuscript for the student of the earlier centuries, for printing imposes on the text, as originally written, a number of processes capable of modifying it far more considerably than the copying of an average scribe. In short, bibliographical knowledge, the study of the book itself as the medium of transmission, is an absolutely essential part of an advanced training in English. But I need not labour this point, as I have already dealt with it in some detail elsewhere.¹

The science, such as it is, of textual criticism will, of course, be a subject of study. To a great extent it deals with the questions of transmission by manuscripts and printed books to which we have just referred, but it should also take cognizance of editorial methods and the manner of presentation of texts for the modern reader. The attention of advanced students must be deliberately directed to such matters as these if we are to avoid in future the irrational jumbles of different methods of textual reproduction which in the past have done so much to hinder the progress of English study.

To this science of textual criticism must certainly be joined a sketch of the historical development of the study of our language and literature, and this not as a means of commemorating those who have been before us, but for the purpose of criticising their methods, and evaluating their statements. In such subjects as linguistic study and literary history, every new student has to make use of an enormous mass of material collected by others, and it is absolutely essential that from the very outset he should acquire some knowledge of the probable strength of the foundations on which he builds. The greatest misfortune from which the study of English has suffered is that in its early days it seems to have been regarded as a suitable pastime for any literary amateur without special training. Nothing is more deplorable than the time and space wasted in much modern work

¹ 'Notes on Bibliographical Evidence for Literary Students, &c.' in *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, vol. xii, pp. 211-318.

in reproducing or discussing the opinions and annotations of many early editors and critics whose work is quite evidently not worth the paper that it is printed upon. Until we can rid ourselves of our undue reverence for authority in this and in many other matters, the study of English can never take the position to which it should, of right, lay claim.

To sum up, I plead for :

(1) A careful consideration of what we are really trying to do in teaching 'English,' in order that the various possibilities of the subject may be properly developed in their due proportions, and that when, and as, 'English' replaces the classics as the main vehicle of literary and humanistic training, there shall be no loss to education but rather a gain.

(2) The planning of the English course to fit the needs of students, so that whether we teach them much or little, they shall learn something more or less complete in itself, and not merely fragments which are of no use—and, indeed, cannot be retained—without further study to link them together.

(3) The definite separation of the study into two parts, in the first of which problems of transmission are altogether ignored, and (in accordance with this):

(4) The use, in the first part, of texts so normalized or re-transcribed that the student inevitably learns, from the beginning, the correct pronunciation.

(5) The restriction of the linguistic study (in the first part of the course) to the language of about three distinct periods, e.g. (1) Old English (West-Saxon of about 900 A.D.), (2) the end of the fourteenth century, and (3) the end of the sixteenth century. The language of these periods to be taught much more thoroughly than at present, and with correct pronunciation.

(6) The treatment of earlier English literature as a branch of the literature of Europe, and not as a thing in itself.

(7) The teaching of literature, at any rate in the elementary stages and when dealing with the earlier work, not merely as literature but as the expression of changing modes of life and thought.

(8) Definite training, in the second part of the course, for the study of original texts and for research.

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